

EVALUATION OF THE CONTEMPORARY BRITISH  
CRITICISM OF WORDSWORTH

by

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## INTRODUCTION AND PURPOSE

While securing material for this thesis, the necessity of determining the period of criticism on William Wordsworth to be covered was felt. Therefore, the date of his death, 1850, was selected as the terminating point, with an allowance for articles in Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine and The Quarterly Review, both in 1852. This date was selected since most of the controversial criticism had vanished by this time and Wordsworth's stature as a noble poet was assured. After his death, the magazines either used him for favorable comparison or merely differed as to the degree of his eminence as a poet. Also, with the exception of an enlarged edition of Thomas DeQuincey's Confessions of an English Opium Eater, most of the literary criticism of the romantic movement had been completed and the chief figures of this era had either died or were inactive.

Another problem lay in the separation of the critics of the magazines contemporary with Wordsworth from the literary essayists of his day. Since the vast majority of the articles were unsigned and the authorship of the critical reviews could be determined only by cross-references, and this in only a few cases, the criticism found in the magazines was arranged as a unit separate from the essays written by the men of letters of this period. Although Charles Lamb, William Hazlitt, Thomas DeQuincey, and Leigh Hunt contributed occasionally to the literary periodicals of the day, the tone of their criticism was derived from the essays and letters that they had written since this material

merely reflected the views that were to be found in their works.

The criticism of Lord Byron, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Percy Bysshe Shelley, John Keats, and Robert Southey was acquired from their poetry, letters, essays, that is to say, when they did any critical writing on Wordsworth. Since they are generally known as poets, they were placed in a group apart from the literary essayists. Leigh Hunt was included among the poets owing to the large amount of poetry that he wrote, despite his Autobiography of Leigh Hunt, his work in the field of the essay, and his occupation with The Examiner, in which he did literary criticism. Coleridge was also placed with the poets although his main criticism came from the Biographia Literaria.

Since the tone of the criticism varied, Wordsworth's critics were divided into two groups: the magazines with their reviews and, a second group, the men of letters, poets and essayists, contemporary with him. This second section was further divided into the essayists of the romantic movement and the poets of this school, because of the type of judgment that was done.

The contrasts in the evaluation of Wordsworth's poetry by his contemporaries were emphasized and the agreement between critics was noted. The author of this thesis attempted to summarize and evaluate this criticism as it affected the poet, note the clash between the poet and the critics, and to compare the conflicting views expressed as well as to indicate the temper of the opinions set forth.

## THE MAGAZINE CRITICS AND WORDSWORTH

The verdicts of the early nineteenth century magazine critics ranged from the bitter attack of The Edinburgh Review to the laudatory, friendly reception of The London Quarterly Review. Between the extreme observations of these two reviews, one finds the more impartial and less extravagant criticism. Many of the reviews were searching and significant in their opinions while others attempted to criticize with the views of the classic tradition of the previous century and the reception of the reading public as their chief concern.

## Wordsworth's Views and the Critics' Reaction

The forces of neo-classicism were predominant at the beginning of the nineteenth century in the periodical reviews and were bitter foes of the new romanticism. This antagonistic feeling was best expressed by Francis Jeffrey, the editor of The Edinburgh Review, when he stated the viewpoints of the neo-classic group in the first edition of the magazine.

Poetry has this much at least, in common with religion, that its standards were fixed long ago, by certain inspired writers, whose authority it is no longer lawful to call in question; and that many profess to be entirely devoted to it, who have no good works to produce in support of their pretensions.<sup>1</sup>

This was the definite view of those who eulogized the neo-classic

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<sup>1</sup> "Thalaba the Destroyer: A Metrical Romance. By Robert Southey," The Edinburgh Review, 1:63, October, 1802.

tradition and looked on Wordsworth as a usurping force challenging the doctrines of past literary beliefs. Other periodicals followed this decision by The Edinburgh Review in the determination to hold poetry to the bonds of authority. The neo-classic beliefs had loyal supporters among many of the periodicals at the opening of the last century who caused the romantic poets quite a bit of difficulty in securing a reception to their works by the reading public.

Closely allied with the preceding reason for the reviewers' negative approach to Wordsworth was the reaction from the new tenets of poetry that he had expressed. The critics lost little time in attempting to stamp out some of Wordsworth's outstanding beliefs.

Wordsworth had challenged the older schools of poetry in the Preface to his Lyrical Ballads by stating a rather revolutionary purpose in poetry.

The principal object, then, proposed in these Poems was to choose incidents and situations from common life, and to relate or describe them, throughout, as far as was possible in a selection of language really used by men, and, at the same time, to throw over them a certain colouring of imagination, whereby ordinary things should be presented to the mind in an unusual aspect; . . . Humble and rustic life was generally chosen, because, in that condition, the essential passions of the heart find a better soil in which they can attain their maturity, are less under restraint, and speak a plainer and more emphatic language;<sup>1</sup>

This was to raise a flurry of critical antagonism which resounded

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<sup>1</sup> N. C. Smith, ed., Wordsworth's Literary Criticism, pp. 13-14.

in the vast majority of the magazines. The tenets expressed by Wordsworth are pointed out by Doctor Peek as one of the chief causes of the bitter judgment sounded against him by the critics of the periodicals who were all too inclined to pass harsh verdicts on the poet.<sup>1</sup>

His departure from conventional thought in poetry caused many of the reviewers to strike out viciously at his beliefs as well as the publications of his poetry. Terming his works "low and inelegant" as well as revealing "sloven lines and vulgarity," The Edinburgh Review stated that the Lake poets, and chiefly Wordsworth, should be condemned for their railings against the tenets of greater men.

They constitute, at present, the most formidable conspiracy that has lately been formed against sound judgment in matters poetical; and are entitled to a larger share of our censorial notice, than could be spared for an individual delinquent.<sup>2</sup>

This attitude was echoed in other publications who followed the lead of Jeffrey in attacking the romantic poets. Later, Wordsworth was singled out due to his eminence in this school.

Some few, however, admired his abandonment of traditional forms of poetry. The Eclectic Review noted his distinction as "one of the boldest and most fortunate adventurers in the field of innovation."<sup>3</sup> Some few others concurred but the majority of the

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<sup>1</sup> Mary K. Peek, Wordsworth in England, p. 18.

<sup>2</sup> "Thalaba the Destroyer: A Metrical Romance. By Robert Southey," op. cit., p. 64.

<sup>3</sup> "Poems in Two Volumes. By William Wordsworth," The Eclectic Review, 7:35, January, 1808.

critics received him with rancor and hostility. It was not until many years later, around 1819, that his alterations in the field of poetic thought were accepted to a large extent by the reading public and the magazine critics.

It was, then, his new approach to poetry which created an uproar that was to cause a large amount of malevolent criticism. Perhaps no one was to be eulogized more than Wordsworth but, also, no one was to be opposed more bitterly.

Although the style, diction, and thought of his poetry were accepted and praised to a large extent, the periodical critics caustically lashed out at his subject matter and the "language really used by men." One and all condemned his use of "humble and rustic life." Their virulence was extremely high on this point, and Fraser's Magazine, an influential periodical of the day, deplored his "want of judgment. . . that results in non-sense."<sup>1</sup>

This was echoed by almost all of the periodical reviewers. They altogether overlooked the statement that he attempted to take the language of men and purify it "from what appears to be its real defects, from all lasting and rational causes of dislike or disgust."<sup>2</sup> His concept of placing intellectual phrases in the mouths of rustic subjects was virulently scorned and maliciously attacked. This antagonism was to resound in all the magazines. Fraser's Magazine again revealed the opposition shown

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<sup>1</sup> "Literary Characters. By Pierce Pungent. 'Mr. Wordsworth', Fraser's Magazine, 3:562, June, 1831.

<sup>2</sup> Smith, op. cit., p. 14.

to Wordsworth when they caustically indicated their scorn of his efforts.

He attempted to show that Homer, and Virgil, and Tasso, and Aristo, and Spenser, and Milton, and Shakespeare, and all the others before him, understood very imperfectly both the true language and the fit subjects for poetry, which it was reserved for him, Mr. Wordsworth, to send to the children of men.<sup>1</sup>

That this was the main stumbling block in Wordsworth's reception by the literary magazines may be pointed out in every review. His subject matter was malevolently abused and anathema was directed at his use of language because of the selection of incongruous characters associated with grandiose thoughts to illustrate his poems. Such works as Peter Bell, The Idiot Boy, and Alice Fell were severely raked by the critical broadsides hurled against them. The critics scorned these works and Jeffrey expressed the opinion of the reviewers quite positively.

It is the great misfortune of Mr. Wordsworth, on the contrary, that he is exceedingly apt to make choice of subjects which are not only unfit in themselves to excite any serious emotion, but naturally present themselves to ordinary minds as altogether ridiculous; and, consequently, to revolt and disgust his readers by an appearance of paltry affectation, or incomprehensible conceit.<sup>2</sup>

The critical attacks by the magazine reviewers concentrated mainly on his association of noble and lofty conceptions with low objects and incidents. There was almost united opposition to his poetry and it was easily noticeable in the periodicals that the largest part of the criticism directed at Wordsworth was due to

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1 "Literary Characters. By Fierce Pungent. 'Mr. Wordsworth', " op. cit., p. 558.

2 "The Isle of Palms and other Poems. By John Wilson," The Edinburgh Review, 19:374, February, 1812.

his subject matter in the poems and the language associated with incongruous characters.

This lack of discretion by Wordsworth in selecting the characters in his poems was bitterly castigated by the periodicals. Too often, however, articles censured whole volumes of the poet's works since he had included those that could be singled out for attack, for example, Alice Fell and The Waggoner. The failure of Wordsworth to choose his subject with greater care often led to much negative criticism that could have been avoided. One notes the judgment on The Excursion by The Quarterly Review: "One objection it is impossible not to foresee. It will be asked, Why put such eloquent discourse in the mouth of a pedlar?"<sup>1</sup>

Thus it is possible to point out the following reasons as the main sources of the critics' clash with Wordsworth's poetic standards and works: the neo-classic tradition that was still strong in literary circles at this time, the tenets of poetry that he expressed, and his use of subject matter and inappropriate language in his poetry. The evaluation of Wordsworth and his poetry by the reviewers tended to emphasize these differences and stress them in their negative criticism. Much harsh judgment could have been avoided and the critics would have been more receptive if Wordsworth had only tried to be more selective and critical of his own works. This blind lack of self-criticism created undue harshness in the reviews of the magazines.

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<sup>1</sup> "On The Excursion by Wordsworth," The Quarterly Review, 12:111, October, 1814.

If one ignores the virulent opposition previously noted, the reaction to Wordsworth and his poetry was to grow more favorable as time passed. This receptive attitude was to increase until, by 1842, even The Edinburgh Review had declared him a great poet in an article on Thomas Moore.<sup>1</sup> In the year that Wordsworth died, Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine noted the esteem in which he was held as a poet.

Wordsworth all the world consents to honour. Living, he already ranks with the greatest of our ancestors. His faults even are no longer canvassed; they are frankly admitted, and have ceased to disturb us.<sup>2</sup>

Previous to this, many periodical critics had noted his power in depicting nature and had praised his ability to interpret the beauty and the forces of creation. John Wilson even pointed out that no one excelled Wordsworth in lauding nature and that his place in poetry ranked with the great poets of literary fame.

Wordsworth alone of all Poets--living or dead--may be said to have drunk at the same Fount--and to have been urged thither by the same sacred thirst as the Poet of the Faerie Queen.<sup>3</sup>

His clearness of language, fluency, and genius were noted by The London Quarterly Review and his place at the top of the poets of his day was assured in this respect.<sup>4</sup> Despite his earlier mistreatment at the hands of the reviewers, some ranked him high for

<sup>1</sup> "The Poetical Works of Thomas Moore, Esq. Collected by himself," The Edinburgh Review, 75:167, April, 1842.

<sup>2</sup> "Tennyson's Poems," Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine, 65: 453, April, 1849.

<sup>3</sup> "Spenser," Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine, 34:824, November, 1835.

<sup>4</sup> "Concerning The Sonnets of William Wordsworth. Collected in One Volume," The London Quarterly Review, 69:2, December, 1841.

the fresh tenets of his poetry. But these were in the very small minority in his early years and failed to stem the tide of abuse that dogged his poetry in this respect. It was many years until his doctrine was to be accepted.

He was also exalted for his philosophic thought in such poems as The Excursion and received high praise for his intellectual powers although many disagreed with his beliefs. In the field of the sonnet, Wordsworth was to secure an excellent reception and to be frequently compared with Milton. In 1822, Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine claimed for Wordsworth the ability to surpass Milton in this respect.<sup>1</sup>

Despite the heavy amount of negative criticism, Wordsworth was able to triumph over the censorious and burning opinions aroused in the early portion of his poetic career. During the first decade of the nineteenth century, this antagonistic attitude was at its height. After 1821, although his poetic decline was on its way, the reception to the truth of his literary genius was rapidly becoming secure. The magazine critics gradually tended to acknowledge his mastery of poetry and to seek his proper place in the hierarchy of English literary figures. It soon became apparent that the literary reviewers were merely debating the question as to how high was to be the position of eminence that he was to occupy.

It may be noted here, therefore, that, despite the early dis-

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<sup>1</sup> "Wordsworth's Sonnets and Memorials," Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine, 12:186, August, 1822.

agreement with Wordsworth's poetic creed, the magazine critics were to accept gradually his tenets and to grant him his prominent position in poetry. This situation was to come only after a quite bitter and hostile treatment at the hands of the men who dictated the literary judgment in the quite influential magazines of the nineteenth century. It was an unfortunate beginning to what was to be the career of one of England's most prominent literary figures.

#### The Effect of the Critics on Wordsworth's Rise to Fame

But this struggle with the critics had a damaging effect on his rise to success. Perhaps many of his early disappointments could have been avoided if the magazine reviewers had not lashed out so viciously at him in the youthful days of his poetic career.

Yet, despite the knowledge that his new approach to poetry was certain to cause opposition, Wordsworth's own egotism forbade either retraction of his views or an attempt to effect a conciliatory attitude towards the reviewers. The Eclectic Review pointed to this unfortunate position that was to withhold the recognition of his fame.

Wordsworth, in our judgment, erred in two ways in the application to his theory. He attempted to make some things yield poetry which never can or will yield it; and he employed to excess elements which, in moderation and mingled with other and higher elements, are admissible enough.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> "Poems, chiefly of early and late years; including The Borderers, a tragedy. By William Wordsworth," The Eclectic Review, 76:571, December, 1842.

Thus Wordsworth, forced into battle with the reviewers, was determined that the public should accept all of his poetry, without reservations, when the retention of a few of the more controversial poems would have retarded, if not stopped, much of the angry denunciations that followed the publication of many of his works.

Many critics would undoubtedly have attacked his works with less venom and malignity if he had suppressed some of the poems that stood out in a ridiculous manner. The Idiot Boy, which was published in 1819, was one of the works that were assaulted strenuously and with great maliciousness on all sides. The periodical reviewers that were more antagonistic to the poet happily seized upon such works as this as a confirmation of the justice of their virulent criticism.

One of the chief reasons for the retardation of Wordsworth's rise to fame, therefore, was due to his own obstinacy and the failure to judge critically his own works. Wordsworth was often to go from the heights of poetic beauty to the depths of ridiculousness. The Eclectic Review observed that the poet's fame "was needlessly deferred by difficulties and obstacles which he threw in his own path."<sup>1</sup>

That he was unhappy with his reception by the magazine critics and angry with the "incompetent judges" and "multitude of unhappy and misguided, and misguiding beings" who assaulted his poetry is quite apparent in his letters.<sup>2</sup> He acknowledged the an-

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1 Ibid., p. 568.

2 William Knight, ed., Letters of the Wordsworth Family, vol. 1, p. 309.

imosity and venom stirred up by the periodical reviews but, nevertheless, he still refused to change his position or allay any of the controversial material. Although he felt that the income from his works should suffice for the support of his family, he admitted "the unexpected pressure of the times" from the magazines, his own erroneous calculation of his works "to suit the taste of the times" and the reviews, the lack of "comprehensiveness of the subject" of his poetry by the critics, and the inability to sacrifice his own judgment made his position perilous, so he remarks in a letter to Lord Lonsdale in the year 1812.<sup>1</sup>

Although fully aware of the judgment by the reviews and the reasons for it, he was determined to ignore the criticism and to continue on the path that he had laid down. This refusal to acknowledge any truth in their reviews was to lead to further antagonism. In a letter to John Wilson of Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine in 1800, he pointed out his position to which he continued to adhere to throughout his life.

Some have little knowledge of natural imagery of any kind, and, of course, little relish for it; some are disgusted with the very mention of the words 'pastoral poetry,' 'sheep,' or 'shepherds'; some cannot tolerate a poem with a ghost or any supernatural agency in it; . . . some cannot bear to see delicate and refined feelings ascribed to men in low conditions of society, because their vanity and self-love tell them that these belong only to themselves and men like themselves in dress, station, and way of life; others are disgusted with the naked language of some of the most interesting passions of men, because it is either indelicate, or gross, or vulgar; . . . I return then to the question, please whom? or what? I answer, human nature, as it has been, and ever will be. But where are we to find the best measure of this? I answer, from within; by stripping our own hearts naked, and

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid., vol. 2, pp. 1-2.

by looking out of ourselves towards men who lead the simplest lives, and those most according to nature; men who have never known false refinements, wayward and artificial desires, false criticisms, effeminate habits of thinking and feeling, or who, having known these things, have outgrown them.<sup>1</sup>

Thus he continued to ignore the magazine reviewers and to maintain his views without change and, as a result, he increased their animosity.

Another chief cause of Wordsworth's slow rise to fame was the vitriolic and extremely hostile reviews in The Edinburgh Review and Jeffrey, the literary editor until 1829 and the man who set the literary policy of the periodical. Although an admirer of Shelley, Byron, and other poets of the romantic movement, Jeffrey caustically condemned Wordsworth with zeal and animosity. It is possible to sum up his reaction to the poet and his works in the short sentence that began the article on The Excursion: "This will never do."<sup>2</sup> Versatile, legalistic, and dogmatic in his beliefs, he used the classic forms and conventions of poetry to determine the value of a poet. It was Jeffrey who began the bitter treatment of Wordsworth and urged the approval of his criticism in other reviews. Perhaps no one man did more to condemn Wordsworth and seek his banishment from the approved lists of English literary figures than this reviewer. Not one review while he was editor of The Edinburgh Review was favorable to Wordsworth. By manipulating the beliefs of the poet in his crit-

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid., vol. 3, pp. 437-438.

<sup>2</sup> "The Excursion, being a portion of The Recluse, a Poem. By William Wordsworth," The Edinburgh Review, 24:1, November, 1814.

icism so that they would appear ridiculous, and by audacious and disdainful remarks, he sought to destroy Wordsworth's power as a poet.

That he refused to change or alter his position in any way is noted in the diary of Henry Crabb Robinson.

Empson related that Jeffrey had lately told him that so many people had thought highly of Wordsworth, that he was resolved to reperuse his poems, and see if he had anything to retract.<sup>1</sup>

But he was to discover nothing that was to change his attitude towards the poet.

He found nothing to retract, except, perhaps, a contemptuous and flippant phrase or two. Empson says, he believed Jeffrey's distaste for Wordsworth to be honest,--mere uncongeniality of mind.<sup>2</sup>

This enmity Jeffrey continued to present and Wordsworth was to return in his letters only since he refused to enter into open retaliation against the reviewer. Dorothy Wordsworth reflects the poet's attitude towards Jeffrey when she refers to a particularly lashing attack on Wordsworth in her letter to Thomas De-Quincey.

There never was such a compound of despicable falsehood, malevolence, and folly. . . It would be treating Mr. Jeffrey with too much respect to notice any of his criticisms; but when he makes my brother censure himself, by quoting words as from his poems which are not there, I do think it is proper that he should be contradicted and put to shame. I mentioned this to my brother, and he agrees with me.<sup>3</sup>

They, Dorothy and William Wordsworth, were quite aware of his

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<sup>1</sup> Thomas Sadler, ed., Diary Reminiscences and Correspondence of Henry Crabb Robinson, vol. 2, p. 257.

<sup>2</sup> Loc. cit.

<sup>3</sup> Knight, op. cit., vol. 1, pp. 432-433.

vicious attacks and, through their letters, one may find their anger flaring up at his misquotations, his personal feelings on the works of the poet, and his extremely negative criticism. Yet, despite his obvious faults, Jeffrey retained a great amount of influence over the reading public, especially in Scotland. As a result, he was easily able to deal destructive blows to the poet's reputation. This situation was emphasized when Coleridge, in 1825, in a letter to Daniel Stuart, comments on the periodical's influence on the public of this century.

Such has been the influence of The Edinburgh Review that in all Edinburgh not a single copy of Wordsworth's works or any part of them could be procured a few months ago.<sup>1</sup>

This state of affairs was also noted by John Wilson in Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine where he discusses Wordsworth's comparatively friendly reception in England and his bad reputation in Scotland which he attributes to the virulence of The Edinburgh Review and Jeffrey, its editor.<sup>2</sup> The independence of the critic and his vigorous attacks did much damage to the poet.

Coleridge, however, claimed in his letters that Jeffrey was an "enthusiastic admirer of Wordsworth's poetry, but it was necessary that a Review should have character."<sup>3</sup> This may have been true but, if one noted the criticism in The Edinburgh Review and

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<sup>1</sup> Ernest Hartley Coleridge, ed., Letters of Samuel Taylor Coleridge, vol. 2, pp. 741-742.

<sup>2</sup> "Essays on the Lake School of Poetry, Number 1," Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine, 3:371, July, 1818.

<sup>3</sup> Coleridge, ed., op. cit., p. 742.

used it as a ruler to measure the critic's beliefs, it would be quite impossible to consider anything but Jeffrey's virulence as far as the poet was concerned.

In The London Quarterly Review was found another foundation to support the unfriendly attitude by the magazine critics and its subsequent effect on Wordsworth's rise to fame. Referring to the poet, they noted the temper of the criticism of this early part of the nineteenth century.

He knowingly and wantonly laid himself open to ridicule at a period when criticism was infected by a spirit of sarcasm--which, ignorant and shallow as it was, was not ill calculated to please the popular appetite, was attended therefore with eminent success, and brought a blight, as of a poisonous insect, upon the growth of everything that was great and noble. Criticism and poetry, which ought to flourish together, as members of the same family of art, were then hardly even in friendly relations with each other: the former, on the contrary, growing beside the latter like a mildewed ear, 'blasting its wholesome brother.'<sup>1</sup>

The vast majority of the criticism in this period of the reviews was quite caustic and was written to amuse rather than to furnish constructive thinking. The critics tended to think more of pleasing their reading public than to delve deeply into critical thought.

With few exceptions, notably The London Quarterly Review and, to a lesser extent, The Eclectic Review, the criticism of the magazines was written in an ironical and malevolent vein. And, with such poetical subjects as idiots, donkeys, and crazed women,

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<sup>1</sup> "On Poetical Works of William Wordsworth and Selections from the Poems of William Wordsworth," The London Quarterly Review, 52:172, November, 1834.

Wordsworth was a perfect target for many assaults by the critics of the periodicals. Time after time they would seize upon these as focal points for their attacks. Therefore, his rise to fame was retarded by their many onslaughts and vigorous sallies.

Except for comments in his letters, Wordsworth was generally aloof from the barbs of the magazines and contemptuous of their attitude. In a letter to Edward Moxon in 1842, concerning the critics' reaction to the publication of his Poems, Chiefly of Early and Late Years, he stated his indifference to their reviews and their reactions.

If they be inclined to speak well of it, either from its own merits or their good opinion of the authors in general, to send the book is superfluous; and if they are hostile, it would only gratify the editor's or reviewer's vanity, and set an edge upon his malice.<sup>1</sup>

Therefore, one would conclude that his enmity towards the magazine critics had reached a tone of scornful indifference near the end of his life.

To sum up the negative effect of the early nineteenth century literary periodicals on Wordsworth's rise to fame, one notices clearly that their part was extremely large in retarding his reputation as a great writer. Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine indicated the amount of damage done by the reviewers:

If the shafts of dishonest malice have at any moment wounded the high spirit of the Poet himself--and if the pertinacity of the wicked zeal with which he has been persecuted has prevented his genius from going abroad so speedily and so widely in its workings as nature meant it to do--the fault of the critics has

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<sup>1</sup> Knight, op. cit., vol. 3, p. 242.

not been small.<sup>1</sup>

This was quite true. The unfavorable reviews did a great amount of damage, and, as it will be seen, the English men of literature contemporary with him were the ones who aided most in assuring his recognition as a great poet.

Thus, four considerations stand out as the chief barriers to Wordsworth's rise to fame: his own egotism and refusal to change or alter his position, his uncritical view of his own works, The Edinburgh Review and Jeffrey, the editor, and the sarcastic note of criticism prevalent during his early years as a poet.

However, one must be careful, when noting the retardation of his reception as a noble contributor to English poetry by the magazine reviewers, not to assume that their criticism was entirely negative in its content or its effect. Although their malicious judgment was directed at the parts of his poetry, it was interesting to note that, at least by the last twenty years of his life, Wordsworth was considered a great poet while his critics had quit their abuse or had changed their opinions. The London Quarterly Review pointed this out in an article in 1834.

It is, indeed, not only instructive, but edifying, to observe the manner in which the great poet has risen into fame, whilst the smaller critics have dwindled into insignificance,--the manner in which the witty worldlings of twenty years or thirty years ago,--those who made mouth at him in the days of his unpopularity, dealing about their petty acutenesses and exulting in the power to sting, would now be glad to

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<sup>1</sup> "Wordsworth's River Duddon," Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine, 7:206, May, 1820.

have it supposed that they knew all the while that they were assailing a great man, but that ridicule, forsooth, being their high vocation, they made it a point to laugh at everything, where they could get the world to laugh with them.<sup>1</sup>

This serves to illustrate that the early flurry of negative criticism at this time--1834--was dying down and Wordsworth was beginning to realize his place among the eminent poets of English literature.

But, in the main, it was the result of a less vitriolic type of criticism. The older, scathing pattern of review was slowly disappearing and criticism in the magazines was assuming a more quiet and earnest tone.

The vicious, and quite popular, reviews prevalent at the turn of the century had disappeared. There was a tendency to instruct and to review on a higher plane than the former malicious attacks and satiric jibes that were thrust at a literary figure for the amusement of the reading public.

Concerning the efforts of the periodical critics towards the advancement of his fame, it was almost certain that the virulent criticism in the vast majority of the reviews did little or nothing as far as raising the eminence of his position as a poet. Possibly the controversy aroused by the critics of the magazines in reaction to his poetry created interest but, in the main, it was almost impossible to ascribe much, if any, credit to the periodicals. In fact, his reputation with the reading public was

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<sup>1</sup> "On Poetical Works of William Wordsworth and Selections from the Poems of William Wordsworth," op. cit., p. 189.

well on its way before the views of the magazine critics had changed from a negative view to a positive admiration.

All but a few of the reviews were viciously attacking the poet in the early part of the century. It was their hostile judgment that Wordsworth was to condemn and deplore with complete conviction.

Wordsworth himself refused to mention the periodical reviewers in anything but an unfavorable light. In the Letters of the Wordsworth Family, edited by William Knight, there was not a single instance in which Wordsworth gives credit to the magazines for assistance to the reception of his poetry. As a result of the many attacks by the reviewers, he had little but profound suspicion and deep distrust for the critics of the periodicals. This attitude may be noted in the Reminiscences which stressed his position as late as 1841.

Wordsworth holds the critical power very low. . . and he said to-day that if the quantity of time consumed in writing critiques on the works of others were given to original composition, of whatever kind it might be, it would be much better employed; . . . and it would do infinitely less mischief. A false or malicious criticism may do much injury to the minds of others; a stupid invention, either in prose or verse, is quite harmless.<sup>1</sup>

Wordsworth himself gave no credit to the reviews for his rise to fame as a poet and retained a profound mistrust for their work in criticism.

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<sup>1</sup> Smith, op. cit., p. 249.

WORDSWORTH AND THE MEN OF LETTERS  
CONTEMPORARY WITH HIM

In studying the letters, essays, poems, and other works of the men of letters contemporary with Wordsworth, it was noted that a more subdued criticism as well as a greater appreciation and regard for his ability as a poet was shown than the hostile attitudes that were found in the periodical reviews of the early nineteenth century.

That this caustic criticism of the magazines was not the prevailing tone in the more moderate, and probably more sincere, views of the prominent essayists and poets of Wordsworth's day was easily discerned. One could possibly attribute the reason for this less malevolent and more temperate criticism of the poet by the men of letters to the fact that the Lake poet was a member of the same literary movement, hence a more friendly regard. Moreover, almost all of the great figures of English literature of this period had come into contact with him in one way or another and had close connections with the poet. Lamb, Southey, DeQuincey, and Coleridge corresponded with him and Wordsworth frequently mentioned the others in his letters. Only Keats and Hunt were unable to be found in his letters, although both poets knew him and spoke of Wordsworth in their works.

Though their judgment was more sincere as a result of these many contacts with the poet, they were less pointed in the observation of his works on poetry and the tenets that he favored. One could even state that their concern centered more in his per-

sonal character than in the definite examination of his literary efforts.

This avoidance of detailed criticism was extremely noticeable, especially when compared to the hostile reception by the periodicals. Therefore, in order to see this criticism, the works of the contemporaries of Wordsworth were studied to note the judgment done.

#### The Positive Criticism by the Men of Letters

With the notable exceptions of Lord Byron and, to a less extent, Shelley, the poets of the romantic era in England lauded Wordsworth and sought, as was noted in their letters, to spread his fame and increase his stature as a poet with the reading public which, as it has been seen, was swayed against him in the early portion of his career by the hostile critics of the periodicals.

Southey was much like Wordsworth in that he professed radical beliefs in his youth but later changed to Tory convictions when he received the position of poet laureate which he held until his death in 1843. That he was a close friend to Wordsworth may be gathered by the frequency and extent of their correspondence. Repeatedly in his letters, Southey compared Wordsworth with Milton and praised his poetic powers with extreme approbation. Moreover, Southey expressed very little, if any, negative criticism in his letters. He divulged his propitious attitude towards the poet who overshadowed him in literary greatness in a

letter to John May in 1803.

I wish you would read the Lyrical Ballads of Wordsworth; some of them are very faulty; but, indeed, I would risk my whole future fame on the assertion that they will one day be regarded as the finest poems in our language.<sup>1</sup>

Southey was to commend Wordsworth and to praise him as no other poet was to do. This almost devotional attitude was expressed by Southey in every opinion on Wordsworth and the faults of the poet were barely alluded to.

Keats, although detesting Wordsworth for his conceit, admired him as a poet. It was Leigh Hunt who had first drawn the attention of Keats to Wordsworth and caused the admiration of the younger poet for Wordsworth's intellectual powers. If one were to disregard his opinion of the man himself and his personality, it would be possible to observe his esteem of Wordsworth in a letter that he wrote to John Hamilton Reynolds, poet and critic, in 1818.

. . . he is a Genius and superior to us, in so far as he can, more than we, make discoveries, and shed a light in them. Here I must think Wordsworth is deeper than Milton--though I think it has depended more upon the general and gregarious advance of intellect, than individual greatness of Mind. . . He (Milton) did not think into the human heart as Wordsworth has done.<sup>2</sup>

This respect and admiration of the poet's literary powers was to continue until Keats' death in 1821 despite his obvious dislike for Wordsworth's egotism which almost overshadowed the reverence that he held for the poet.

<sup>1</sup> Maurice H. Fitzgerald, ed., The Letters of Robert Southey, p. 64.

<sup>2</sup> Maurice B. Forman, ed., The Letters of John Keats, p. 144.

Notwithstanding Leigh Hunt's early humorous and satiric notations of Wordsworth, he was later to admire him and praise his poetic genius by calling the poet "the Prince of the Bards of his Time."<sup>1</sup> Liberal in politics and romantic in literary training, Hunt drew Keats to Wordsworth as well as eulogizing the poet. In his poem, The Feast of the Poets, Hunt poked fun at Wordsworth by having Apollo note Wordsworth's ridiculous lines "on a straw."

'Was there such trifling on earth?  
What think ye a bard's a mere gossip, who tells  
Of the every-day feelings of every one else,  
And that poetry lies not in something select,  
But in gath'ring the refuse that others reject?'<sup>2</sup>

This negative attitude was later altered in an expanded edition where the text and notes were changed to suit Hunt's modified tastes and, as the following lines indicate, his opinion was more receptive.

'Come, my dear Will,--imperfections apart,--  
Let us have a true taste of our exquisite art:  
You know very well you've the key to my heart.'<sup>3</sup>

This different judgment of Wordsworth and his poetry Hunt was to retain until his demise in 1859.

But it was Coleridge, entering into close friendship with Wordsworth before the outset of the nineteenth century, who undoubtedly did the most penetrating criticism on Wordsworth of any one of the literary figures in the romantic school. Frequently

<sup>1</sup> H. S. Milford, ed., The Poetical Works of Leigh Hunt, p. 154.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p. 152.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p. 153.

mentioning Wordsworth in his letters as well as exchanging many epistles with him, Coleridge exalted his purity of language, his originality and imagination, his close contact with nature, and his fresh thoughts and sympathy. Noting the power of the Lake poet, Coleridge wrote to Southey and expressed his admiration in 1797 of the man with whom he had such a close friendship. "Wordsworth is a very great man, the only man to whom at all times and in all modes of excellence I feel myself inferior."<sup>1</sup>

The impulsive Coleridge and the more austere Wordsworth remained close companions despite some misunderstandings. An example of their differences was to be seen in the quarrel between the poets over Montague's indiscreet report of Wordsworth's warnings about Coleridge's habits. In the Biographia Literaria, Coleridge was to penetrate into the writings of his friend as no other figure of the romantic movement in literature was to do.

The reception of Wordsworth's poetry by the prominent essayists of the early half of the nineteenth century was similar to that given by the poets. Their positive criticism was commendatory and propitious as well as earnest in its content in reference to the poet's works. And it was the essayists that were to reflect his genius and laud his poetic stature just as the poets had done.

Thinking of Wordsworth as the greatest of living poets, Charles Lamb was fondly attached to the poet and Wordsworth reciprocated the warmth of his friendship in the letters that he

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<sup>1</sup>Coleridge, op. cit., p. 224.

sent to the kindly essayist.

Indifferent to nature and favoring London, Lamb was quite distinct from his friends of the romantic movement. Though their amiable relationship was often asserted, the essayist never attempted to offer much critical judgment on the poet's works. One rarely finds, in the letters of Charles Lamb, more than a scattered line or two in which he mainly censures the poet's personality. It was due to a critical article in The Quarterly Review, in 1814, that their friendship almost dissolved. The weak defense of Wordsworth by Lamb caused the poet to send an angry letter to his friend. Fortunately, their anger abated and peace was restored.

Thomas DeQuincey, although a definite admirer of the poet and one of the first to recognize his genius, neglected to meet Wordsworth until 1807. This he attributed to his timidity at approaching the great poet.

On the contrary, the real cause of my delay was the too great profundity, and the increasing profun-  
dity, of my interest in this regeneration of our na-  
tional poetry; and the increasing awe, in due propor-  
tion to the decaying thoughtlessness of boyhood, which  
possessed one for the character of its author.<sup>1</sup>

His admiration for the poet was very great, although in later years this friendship died because of his own tactlessness and Wordsworth's egotism. Believing Wordsworth to be a great poet and certain of his tremendous intellectual power, DeQuincey eulogized him by asserting that his place in the ranks of the men of

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<sup>1</sup> Thomas DeQuincey, Reminiscences of the English Lake Poets, p. 89.

English literature was extremely high.

. . . a man who is not simply destined to be had in everlasting remembrance by every generation of men, but . . . to be had in that sort of remembrance which has as its shrine the heart of man.<sup>1</sup>

This approval DeQuincey was to retain although their friendship ended in 1835 when the essayist unfortunately published the too frank reminiscences of his life at Grasmere and his association with Wordsworth.

Since William Hazlitt was an extreme liberal, he was not very commendatory over the poet's lessening regard for republicanism. But he did praise Wordsworth as being "the most original poet now living" and commended him for his intellectual and lofty conceptions as well as his power in depicting the force and beauty of nature.<sup>2</sup> However, one finds that their correspondence was practically nothing since the letters of the poet fail to reveal one letter written to Hazlitt and only an occasional reference to the essayist despite Hazlitt's interest in the works of the poet.

In reviewing the positive reception to Wordsworth and his works by the men of letters contemporary with him, one notes the high esteem that they held for the competence of his ability, the enthusiasm that they revealed, and the position of eminence as a poet they set aside for him. But, with the exception of Coleridge's searching criticism and the work done by Hazlitt and De-

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<sup>1</sup> Thomas DeQuincey, Literary Reminiscences, vol. 1, p. 291.

<sup>2</sup> A. R. Waller and A. Glover, The Collected Works of William Hazlitt, p. 156.

Quincey, one fails to find any exacting or deep judgment as was found in the reviews by the magazines in the early part of this century. It seemed to be quite evident that, as far as positive critical thought was concerned, the men of letters were content to eulogize him in a general way and to forego the means of critically examining his works in detail. This may be explained by the concern of the men of letters with their own work or the possibility that their interests lay in other fields for critical examination. Lamb, for example, was concerned with the Elizabethan era and the literary figures of that time and failed to do much, if any, critical judgment on the men of letters of his era.

#### The Negative Criticism by the Men of Letters

The negative opinions of these essayists and poets of the early nineteenth century on Wordsworth may be narrowed to more specific reasons. With the exception of Robert Southey, whose attitude towards Wordsworth was almost invariably positive, the main contentions of the negative evaluation of Wordsworth were more concerned with his personal character than with his poetry. Shelley expresses this opinion in a definite fashion when he notes: "What a beastly and pitiful wretch that Wordsworth! That such a man should be such a poet!"<sup>1</sup> Their enmity was almost unanimous in this feature of the personality of Wordsworth, and those that came into contact with the poet detested his overbearing

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<sup>1</sup> Roger Ingpen, ed., The Letters of Percy Bysshe Shelley, p. 607.

vanity.

Another basis for disagreement with Wordsworth was the antagonistic reception to some of his subject matter as was found in the reviews of the periodicals. This was principally noted in the criticism of the essayists.

Concerning the negative reception of Wordsworth and his works by the poets of the romantic school, no one person was more virulent and caustic in the treatment of Wordsworth than Lord Byron who, paradoxically, was to be influenced by the Lake poet. Byron, very much like Francis Jeffrey, the editor of The Edinburgh Review, denounced Wordsworth with much virulence in his poetry and often this rancorous view of Byron degenerated into mere abuse. To note an unusual circumstance, Byron, despite the rancor in his poetry, very rarely mentioned Wordsworth in his letters except for a malicious statement.

Henry Crabb Robinson noted that Byron studied and imitated Wordsworth and, strangely enough, maintained a deep reverence for the poet after a visit with him.<sup>1</sup> However, this veneration was not revealed in his poetry, and Robinson also quoted him as speaking of Wordsworth as a "D--d fool!" with great contempt for his egotism.<sup>2</sup>

In Byron's famous English Bards and Scotch Reviewers, there was found a lashing condemnation of the poet.

Next comes the dull disciple of thy school,  
That mild apostate from poetic rule,

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<sup>1</sup> Sadler, op. cit., vol. 2, p. 481.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., vol. 1, p. 351.

The simple Wordsworth, framer of a lay  
 As soft as evening in his favourite May,  
 Who warns his friend 'to shake off toil and trouble,  
 And quit his books, for fear of growing double;'  
 Who, both by precept and example, shows  
 That prose is verse, and verse is merely prose;  
 Convincing all, by demonstration plain,  
 Poetic souls delight in prose insane;  
 And Christmas stories tortured into rhyme  
 Contain the essence of the true sublime.  
 Thus, when he tells the tale of Betty Foy,  
 The idiot mother of 'an idiot boy;'  
 A moon-struck; silly lad, who lost his way,  
 And, like his bard, confounded night with day;  
 So close on each pathetic part he dwells,  
 And each adventure so sublimely tells,  
 That all who view 'the idiot in his glory'  
 Conceive the bard the hero of the story.<sup>1</sup>

Byron's venomous attacks on Wordsworth were returned by the poet, with less malignity, in his letters. This severe castigation of the Lake poet was continued by the turbulent lord in Don Juan and the animosity expressed by Byron remained in his judgment until his death at Missolonghi in 1824.

In a note to Byron's Don Juan, there was noticed another cause of Byron's malevolence towards Wordsworth.

Wordsworth's place may be in the Customs--it is, I think, in that or the Excise--besides another at Lord Lonsdale's table, where this poetical charlatan and political parasite licks up the crumbs with a hardened alacrity; the converted Jacobin having long subsided into the clownish sycophant of the worst prejudices of the aristocracy.<sup>2</sup>

Wordsworth's growing conservatism and the necessity of gaining pecuniary support for his family contributed to the diminishing of his earlier liberalism. The poet's trend towards the beliefs of the Tory party and the decline of his earlier liberal thoughts

<sup>1</sup> The Poetical Works of Lord Byron, p. 114.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p. 894.

were noted in a letter to Francis Wrangham in 1813.<sup>1</sup> Shelley also was to reveal hostility towards Wordsworth on his political beliefs.

Byron also showed an intense dislike for the poet's egotism and he was not at all hesitant in raking Wordsworth at the slightest provocation.

The radical convictions and disposition of Percy Bysshe Shelley were well known and, in a sonnet that he wrote to the poet, To Wordsworth, he sorrowfully censured the poet's acceptance of the position of Distributor of Stamps for the County of Westmoreland.

In honored poverty thy voice did weave  
Songs consecrate to truth and liberty,--  
Deserting these, thou leavest me to grieve,  
Thus having been, that thou shouldst cease to be.<sup>2</sup>

This acceptance of a government post was disliked by the younger romantics and caused a definite reaction to his poetic leadership, thus following the lead of Shelley.

Although Shelley admired Wordsworth as a poet, he detested him for his egotism and vanity as well as his shift from early liberal ideas to the political conservatism of his later life.

In spite of Leigh Hunt's many assaults on the Tory government in The Examiner, he did not condemn Wordsworth's political beliefs. Instead, he followed Byron and Shelley in lashing out at Wordsworth's irritating vanity and self-esteem that repulsed

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<sup>1</sup> Knight, op. cit., vol. 2, p. 20.

<sup>2</sup> G. E. Woodberry, ed., The Complete Poetical Works of Percy Bysshe Shelley, p. 344.

many otherwise loyal followers of the poet.

Taking a humorous slap at Wordsworth's subject matter, Hunt noted the ludicrous subject of Peter Bell in his autobiography and scorned his "ominous" views on the part of donkeys.<sup>1</sup>

Keats was still another poet who heartily detested the egotism of Wordsworth and the flaws in his personal character that irked so many literary figures of Wordsworth's day. In a letter to George Keats in 1818, he affirmed this and revealed his antagonism at the poet's faults. He said: "I am sorry that Wordsworth has left a bad impression where-ever he visited in town by his egotism, vanity, and bigotry."<sup>2</sup> Wordsworth, in the eyes of the younger poet, was a great literary figure, but it was impossible for Keats to completely admire the Lake poet because of the flaws in his personality which, incidentally, almost all of the literary figures noticed.

Coleridge was the most perceptive and searching of the poets critical of Wordsworth. He noted that Wordsworth had the following defects which he stressed in his Biographia Literaria: inconstancy of style, the unfortunate selection of subject matter in some cases, his dramatic incongruity, his too intense feelings for certain menial objects, and the foolishness of connecting high and sublime thoughts and images with certain trivial subjects.

Coleridge eulogized Wordsworth but, as he noted in a letter

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<sup>1</sup> Roger Ingpen, ed., The Autobiography of Leigh Hunt, vol. 1, p. 216.

<sup>2</sup> Maurice B. Forman, ed., op. cit., p. 107.

to Robert Southey in 1802, ". . . yet I am far from going all lengths with Wordsworth."<sup>1</sup>

The essayists combined to refute Wordsworth's personal nature. Lamb, after receiving a letter from the poet lamenting his lukewarm defense of Wordsworth's poetry in a periodical, wrote a caustic comment on the self-esteem of the poet to Charles Manning castigating the conceit of Wordsworth and noting the egotism of the poet where his views and works were concerned.<sup>2</sup> Lamb felt that the poet placed a too high value on his own importance.

This egotism of Wordsworth and an occasional exclamation over the poet's subject matter were the only critical thoughts that Lamb expressed about Wordsworth. This last reason--the subject matter of the post--was referred to in a letter of Charles Lamb where he stated: "I received a copy of Peter Bell a week ago, and I hope the author will not be offended if I say I do not much relish it."<sup>3</sup> The usually mild-mannered Lamb had few derogatory remarks on anyone.

Thomas DeQuincey, echoing Lamb's notation of Wordsworth's arrogance and egotism, believed it to be a result of the poet's many interests.

He seemed to me too much like his own Pedlar in  
The Excursion; a man so diffused amongst innumerable  
objects of equal attraction, that he had no cells left  
in his heart for individual attachments.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Coleridge, op. cit., p. 386.

<sup>2</sup> Alfred Ainger, ed., The Letters of Charles Lamb, vol. 1,  
p. 29.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., vol. 2, p. 28.

<sup>4</sup> Thomas DeQuincey, Literary Reminiscences, vol. 2, p. 246-  
247.

Lauding Wordsworth's power in depicting nature, Hazlitt, nevertheless, attacked his subject matter by pointing out that the poet "attaches the deepest and loftiest feelings to the meanest and most superficial objects."<sup>1</sup> Hazlitt was also to divulge disgust with the poet for his intense self-esteem and to chastise him in this respect.

Thus, one notes the following reasons for the bitter denunciation of Wordsworth by the men of letters of this period: his personal self-esteem and egotism, his subject matter and the connection of lofty thought with trivial incidents, and his trend toward conservatism as well as his acceptance of a position as an employee of the Tory government.

The tone of their criticism was quite a bit less virulent than the magazine reviews with the possible exception of Lord Byron. They were content merely to comment on the poet without pouring out the rancor and venom that was to be found in the periodical reviews.

But, with this less malignant form of judgment, one may easily notice the lack of searching critical expression on Wordsworth's works. The statements of the men of the literary world in their poems, essays, letters, and other works failed to show any penetrating note of criticism except for Coleridge and, to a lesser extent, Hazlitt and DeQuincey. This lack of specific and complete critical thought was quite apparent when one noticed

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<sup>1</sup> Waller, op. cit., p. 377.

their final judgment. Wordsworth's subject matter was the only feature of his poetry that was directly pointed to outside of the unanimous condemnation of his own overestimation of his works and his self-assurance. And their revulsion for this trait was all too apparent.

#### SUMMARY OF THE CONTEMPORARY BRITISH CRITICISM OF WORDSWORTH

To note the flurry of criticism that arose after the publication of the Lyrical Ballads in 1798, was to note a reaction that was, in part, a result of the political upheaval of this era. To the English public and literary critics of the magazines of the nineteenth century, this revolution in poetry, which it was, had an unfortunate beginning. The term "revolution" had almost become anathema to the English as a result of the great political and social rebellion in France. It was an unfortunate challenge, and most inopportune, that Wordsworth hurled to a nation which had had early sympathies with the revolution across the Channel but had later changed as a result of the bloodstained course of the Terror and the slaughter that was prevalent in France under the Jacobins.

Although England, at first favorable to the principles and the thought of the revolution in many quarters, was soon to regard reform with distrust and suspicion. The Tory party, reigning supreme from 1784 to 1830, firmly suppressed revolutionary tendencies.

With this historical background, it was comparatively easy

to see how anything that meant change in established conventions and doctrines was certain to receive condemnation. Wordsworth, sympathetic to France until Napoleon revealed his imperialistic ambitions, entered into this period with a revolutionary tone in his Lyrical Ballads and, therefore, stirred up opposition that might not have resulted at a different time when reception would have been more favorable.

That the early criticism and enmity in his reception had a damaging effect on the poet was noted in a letter of Wordsworth to Joseph Cottle, a bookseller and poet, in 1799.

My aversion from publication increases every day, so much so, that no motives whatever, nothing but pecuniary necessity, will, I think, ever prevail upon me to commit myself to the press again.<sup>1</sup>

In spite of all opposition, his Lyrical Ballads survived and he continued on to poetic fame.

#### Comparison of the Criticism by the Magazine Writers and the Men of Letters

To collate the criticism expressed by both the magazine writers and the men of letters, contrasts that were presented in the tone of the judgments pronounced by these men on Wordsworth were noted.

The magazine reviewers were less concerned about preserving a quiet tone of observation than the men of letters. As was seen, the estimates of Wordsworth in the periodicals were quite viru-

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<sup>1</sup> Knight, op. cit., vol. 1, p. 121.

lent and expressive of their opinions. It was noted that the scathing judgments of evaluation in the magazines were quite different than the less vitriolic mood stressed by the men of letters. Their criticism tended to take a less formal note than the reviewers since it was found mostly in their letters and poems, with the exception of the work done by the essayists.

The charges flung at Wordsworth's head were less sensational and not quite as malignant. This was possibly due to the fact that their criticism did not have to please a reading public that was quite receptive to this mode of critical thought. The prevalent note of criticism that was in force at the turn of the century appeared to be in the control of the editor. This was exemplified by Jeffrey, the editor of The Edinburgh Review, who laid down the tone of criticism that was to prevail in this literary magazine until 1829, when he ended his position as head of the periodical.

This exasperating tone of the reviews attracted the attention of the reading public and definitely gave rise to the reflections of their opinions in the mass of individuals who read the critical judgments of the reviewers. The tenor of the verdicts by the men of letters of the romantic movement was to instruct and not to seek added circulation for their works such as was done by the critics of the periodicals. One could modify this by observing the lack of necessity by the men of letters to amuse or entertain, since their comments were generally derived from their letters or poems as comments on Wordsworth without the need to hold the public eye. The essayists could be excluded, in part,

from this assumption.

Critical thought needed little embellishment if it was done in the comparatively tranquil mood of a letter from one friend to another. Only a few--and Byron was a notable example--were harsh in their judgment of Wordsworth. The men of letters were to let the periodicals raise the hue and cry over the poet.

Another reason that was noted for the difference in critical tone between the periodical reviewers and the men of letters was the fact that a policy of anonymity prevailed in the reviews. Whereas a poet or essayist signed his work and his opinions were easily pointed to, the magazines, in all but a very few cases, left the reader ignorant of the author of the criticism. Some were known; for example, John Wilson, a critic and editor of Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine, wrote under the pseudonym "Christopher North." Nevertheless, few articles in the magazines even carried a nom de plume making it quite difficult for the subject of the review or the reading public to determine the authorship of an article.

The type of criticism that the men of letters was to do was more friendly to the poet because they were fellow members of the same literary movement. Although there was no definite substantiation of this, it was possible. Byron inflicted his rancor on almost all of the literary figures of the day, and most of the reviewers as well. So one could almost consider his criticism as a part of his general condemnation of the literary men of the early half of the nineteenth century.

The type of criticism done by the magazine critics and the

men of letters varied. The former group was searching in its convictions and expressed definite views on more specific points. The poets and essayists, as was noted in their literary efforts, either castigated him for his self-esteem or took a general survey of his poetic ability and failed to stress particular subjects. With the exception of Coleridge, Hazlitt, and DeQuincey, who did more specific work on Wordsworth, this lack of detailed criticism was noted. Only on Wordsworth's subject matter did the men of letters express themselves with particular judgment in criticizing the poet.

It was apparent that, in the positive evaluation of Wordsworth by his contemporaries, the men of letters were far ahead of the periodical critics in noting Wordsworth's genius as a poet. Their eulogistic and commendatory views preceded the acceptance of the poet by the majority of the magazine reviewers by several decades. For the early recognition of his poetry, the credit must be assigned to the men of letters. It was not until the 1820's that the harsh critical tone in the reviews lost its prominence and a definite favorable trend was begun.

The poets and essayists of the romantic school, undoubtedly drawn to him by closer literary ties than the magazine critics, had all recognized his poetic genius by 1815 with the exception of Lord Byron whose dislike of Wordsworth's political convictions and subject matter overshadowed his regard for the ability of the poet.

Both the men of letters and the reviewers commended Wordsworth for his intellectual powers and philosophic expression, al-

though they occasionally differed with him in his views. In his description of nature the poet was praised and lauded for the emotion and fluency of expression.<sup>1</sup> As a poet of nature, the critics of all modes of literary expression in the early half of the nineteenth century gave him due credit and placed him in their high esteem.

Another field of Wordsworth's poetry in which the magazine reviewers and the essayists and poets honored him was his work in the sonnet. Southey, the most eulogistic of his admirers in this period, frequently noted Wordsworth as being on an equal plane with Milton. The contemporary critics of the poet generally followed this opinion, with reservations that they had marked.<sup>2</sup> But his power in the use of the sonnet was acclaimed and little disagreement was noted.

Although the men of letters gave high recognition to Wordsworth for his innovations and originality of poetic thought, the critics of the periodicals failed to accept the new tenets expounded in the Preface until the ideas that Wordsworth had expressed were no longer new. Strangely enough, Wordsworth appeared to be opposed to new theories and expressions of poetical thought in his later years. In other words, he was intolerant of those who occupied his former position of trying to affect a change in

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<sup>1</sup> "An Hour's Talk About Poetry." Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine, 30:477, September, 1831.

<sup>2</sup> "River Duddon and other Poems by William Wordsworth." The Eclectic Review, 32:170, July, 1820.

the conventional mode of literary expression.

By the end of his life, in 1850, Wordsworth had reached the high stature that he now occupies. A close perusal of the reviews of the periodicals at the time around the year that he died reveals the truth of this. It was quite different from the early hostility that he incurred. If any dissension appeared, it was due to some difference over a minor point of slight consequence. Fraser's Magazine expressed the attitude towards the poet well when it discussed Wordsworth in an article on his posthumous poems.

Mr. Wordsworth had the gratification of living to witness the complete triumph of his reputation over the petulant criticism by which some of his early productions were assailed.<sup>1</sup>

This final agreement between the periodical critics and the men of letters concerning Wordsworth's stature as a poet was quite remarkable when one considers the early virulence and animosity that were first aroused by his poetry and the poetic tenets that he proclaimed to the world of literature. It was definitely a modification of the earlier malevolent and opprobrious attacks that the periodicals had conducted with vigor against the poet. His faults were to be overlooked in the latter part of his life or were to be treated as mere flaws in the spotless character of a literary genius which he was later acclaimed to be.

Unfortunately, the negative attitude towards Wordsworth was

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<sup>1</sup> "Wordsworth's Posthumous Poems," Fraser's Magazine, 42: 129, August, 1850.

continued during the major portion of his life. Both the periodical critics and the men of letters living during the first half of the last century seized upon Wordsworth and the weak spots in the poet's works to lash out at particular points they wished to emphasize. Too often their criticism of works that contained excellent poetry was virulent because the poet included those poems that could be grasped to illustrate the reviewers' convictions.

The variation in the tone and type of their negative criticism has been noted. The agreement of the poets and essayists of the romantic school with the periodical critics on Wordsworth's faults was occasionally the same, but it was more often noted that their critical antagonism to the poet and his works varied with the critic involved.

On Wordsworth's subject matter, these men found common ground. It was not at every subject that they focused their malignant eyes, but at the absurd and ludicrous poetic subjects that were to be found in The Idiot Boy, Peter Bell, and works of that caliber. Their criticism of this subject matter ranged from the vicious and caustic attacks of The Edinburgh Review to the mild reproach of Charles Lamb. The too-blind application of Wordsworth's theory to his works and his lack of self-criticism were the cause of many malicious attacks on his subject matter and also on his lofty and great thoughts on insignificant and banal subjects. But, as in other focal points for the negative criticism done, the periodical reviewers were far more hostile than the men of letters of the poet's day.

The magazine critics, on the appearance of Wordsworth's

tenets of poetry in 1800 in the Preface to the Lyrical Ballads, were quick to grasp these mistakes by the poets as splendid centers for their rancorous attacks. The men of letters, with the notable exception of his friend Coleridge, failed to dwell at any great length on this matter. But the reviewers made up in vigor for the lack of interest by the poets and essayists. It was Wordsworth's subject matter that the main periodicals of the day were to attack again and again as a threat to the formulations and doctrines of past classical traditions that were still revered by the periodical reviewers.

Since the men of literary fame in Wordsworth's time were concerned with the new romanticism and its implications, it was not difficult for them to ignore or commend his doctrines of poetry. But the reviewers were to assault his tenets as an example of literary heresy which they could not, or would not, tolerate in anyone.

It was Wordsworth's self-esteem and vanity that the poets and essayists were to be the most virulent over. And, paradoxically, as the poets had raised little disturbance over the tenets of his poetry, so the reviewers ignored or were ignorant of his egotism. It was undoubtedly a result of the close contact of the literary men of his day with the poet to note this and severely rake Wordsworth for his self-conceit that antagonized so many. Through the large amount of criticism that was read by the author of this thesis, it was noted that the poets' negative views of Wordsworth were concerned more with his personality and its defects than with the critical estimations of the Lake poet that were to be

found in the nineteenth century reviews. Wordsworth's egotism was rarely alluded to and one must assume that it was a result of intimacy with the poet more than for any other reason.

#### The Results of this Criticism on the Nineteenth Century Public

That Wordsworth was to suffer from the extremely hostile reviews of the magazine critics may easily be seen in the letters of the poet. His anxiety and concern over the unfavorable reception to his works is frequently the prime concern of many of the letters that he wrote.

Despite a legacy of nine hundred pounds from Raisley Calvert in 1795 and the fairly adequate sale of the Lyrical Ballads, Wordsworth frequently complained of the effect of the virulent and antagonistic reviews on the sale of his poetry. In a letter to Mrs. Clarkson in 1808, Dorothy Wordsworth stressed the hope that the sale of The White Doe of Rylstone would advance the purchase of her brother's works that had been published previously to this date and whose sales were moving far too slowly to obtain any great amount of pecuniary support.<sup>1</sup>

In 1812, Wordsworth, in a letter to Daniel Stuart, requested a position with the government to aid his financial difficulties and even spoke of his troubles with the sales of his poetical works.

I have no objection, I may add, to quit this part of the country, provided the salary be adequate, and

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<sup>1</sup> Knight, op. cit., vol. 1, p. 343.

the duty what I am equal to without being under the necessity of withdrawing myself from literature, which I find an unprofitable concern.<sup>1</sup>

It was this difficulty in securing necessary funds that led him to accept the position as an employee of the government as Distributor of Stamps for Westmorland in 1813. The office was to relieve partially his financial difficulty. Both Dorothy and William Wordsworth were to maintain little hope of recognition of his genius and for the increasing sales of his poetry at this time, hence his acceptance of the post.

This difficulty in securing money from his poetic projects lasted almost to the end of his life. Although he was never to be alarmed seriously over the lack of ready funds, the struggle that he had was quite noticeable in his letters. In the years following his appointment to a government office, he continually stated his disappointment over the reception of his poetry by the reading public.

Finally, in 1842, the government relieved him of his difficulties by granting the elderly poet a pension of three hundred pounds a year. In the following year, Wordsworth received the poet laureateship after the death of Southey. At first refusing the position because of his age, since he was in his seventy-fourth year, he later accepted when informed that the post was to be honorary and little work was to be connected with it. This came after he had protested to Lord Morpeth, in 1840, that he

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid., vol. 2, p. 11-12.

would never seek a pension.<sup>1</sup>

In view of Wordsworth's letters, then, it was quite certain that, up until his death, the works of the poet failed to keep him from financial difficulties. Since the power of the reviews was great at this time, as has already been seen, their part was not small in retarding Wordsworth's fame. How much the hostile criticism contributed to this state of affairs was uncertain. But, if one accepted Wordsworth's story of the struggle with the critics and the difficulty with the sale of his books, the fault of the critics for his unwelcome reception by the reading public was not small.

#### CONCLUSIONS

The criticism prevalent in the nineteenth century periodicals was the foe of innovation and Wordsworth was the principal target among the poets. Their malicious attacks paved the way for his hostile reception by the reading public. Their animosity to his poetry was quite venomous although a few of the periodicals had noted his poetic stature from the beginning. It was noticed, however, that these were definitely in a small minority, and their effect was submerged by the rancorous assaults of the leading periodicals who were so influential in his day.

To the poets and essayists must go the credit for eulogizing Wordsworth and recognizing his genius despite their obvious dis-

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid., vol. 3, p. 194.

gust with his self-esteem and excessive egotism. The general nature of their criticism was apparent and the concern of the men of letters with Wordsworth's personal character was quite surprising. It was often their chief concern with the exception of only a few of the poets and essayists of Wordsworth's day.

The new tenets of poetry he promulgated, his egotism, the tone of criticism prevalent in the early part of this century and the belief in the traditional forms of poetry, and his lack of self-criticism were found to be the main hindrances to his rise to poetic fame. The absence of any one of these could have undoubtedly saved the poet much grief and quite a bit of disappointment.

Another significant point was that Wordsworth's poetry was not completely accepted by the majority of the literary reviewers and the men of letters of his day until the latter part of his life. Also, the reading public was quite unreceptive to the poet's works as was evidenced by his pecuniary difficulties. The lack of their enthusiasm for his poetry contributed many disappointments to Wordsworth although he and many of his contemporaries were certain that his poetry would achieve an eminent position in literature.

That much of the criticism was erroneous and lacked suitable concentration in the study of his tenets was also evident. The poet, by self-criticism and a closer perception of the taste of the times, could have avoided some of the malignant criticism that was to retard his fame. However, despite all the negative

forces that obstructed his progress in the early part of the nineteenth century, he was able to achieve greatness and to realize this before his death.

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